

positive Poles

Typically Lancastrian it sounds, the firm that occupies an ancient mill on the lovely, wooded banks of the Lune in the village of Halton and which is known as Luneside Engineering Company (Halton) Ltd. Yet, at least in its origins, it is nothing of the sort: Lancashire and this firm were, so to speak, poles apart.

For the visitor of today the first clue is provided in the waiting room where one wall is dominated by a map of Poland, printed and published in that country in 1969; and on the facing wall is an engraving depicting a scene at the Goose Fair, Cracow. For the initiated, the second clue comes in the form of an acrostic: the initial letters of the firm spell 'lech'. And that word was chosen deliberately, says its Chairman and Managing Director, Col. Teodor Benirski, "because the Poles, as a tribe, were originally called Lechs."

How it all began, and evolved, is a quite remarkable story, rich in international ramifications, and it started on the first day of September, 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland...

At that time Teodor Benirski, born at Stanislaw, was working as production manager at a factory in Warsaw that made aircraft carburettors under licence for a British company in Wolverhampton. With the German forces moving in he decided to move out and continue his work in Rumania where, for a few months, he was employed in the drawing office of an aircraft company. His wife and two daughters he had to leave behind and now they were isolated: because the Russians, too, had moved into his homeland. Before that year was out, Mr. Benirski realised that, once again, he would have to become a soldier and fight for the freedom of his country.

In the last year of the First World War he was just old enough to be drafted into the Austrian army on the side of the Axis and was sent to serve in the infantry on the Italian front a month before hostilities ended. Later he joined the Polish Army, fought in the front line against the Bolsheviks until the end of 1920, reached the rank of lieutenant and gained Poland's highest decoration for bravery.

Italy was a country he had to pass through in 1940 to join the Allied cause and the Free Polish Forces in France. In the month of Dunkirk, he journeyed on by merchant ship from Bordeaux to Liverpool and thence by rail to Glasgow (where, along with countless other ex-patriate militia, he was quartered in tents on a football pitch) and Dunfermline.

"In Scotland our main effort for three months was to learn English!" he recalls. "Most of us knew hardly a word of our new language. After that we took over armoured trains, the ones that patrolled the coasts to keep a look-out for invaders. My train operated out of Barnstaple and I suppose my main job was to be in charge of the driver.

This is the story of a remarkable firm, founded by an equally remarkable man. Sadly, between our recent interview with him and the publication of this article, Colonel Teodor Benirski died - in - December at Lancaster Royal Infirmary, following a stroke. We nevertheless print this account unaltered, by way of posthumous tribute.

Luneside Engineering, needless to say, continues in business, perpetuating the standards and spirit of its founder.

Then, for a time, I was sent to the factory in the Midlands that was owned by the company for which I had made aircraft carburettors in Poland. After that, it was back to Scotland where I had my own unit in Edinburgh. Our job was to translate technical information and instructions regarding equipment that would be used by Polish forces."

Towards the end of the war a centre was set up in Millom by the Government to help prepare for civilian life in this country those members of the Polish forces - and there were about 1,500 of them - who had decided not to return to their homeland. Teodor Benirski was among them: and, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, he was appointed chief instructor.

Naturally, his first thought was to fetch his family: but, with tragic irony, in the month after the World War ended his wife was killed in a railway accident near Cracow. It wasn't until the following summer that his daughters, aged sixteen and fourteen, were smuggled out of Poland and he met them in Germany. The girls went to school in Edinburgh where the elder gained the qualifications to take her to Trinity College, Dublin, where she secured a degree. Then, in true Benirski family tradition, she learned Spanish, went to Spain to teach English and eventually emigrated to the United States. There she married and although she now lives in Chicago two of her three sons are being educated at Stonyhurst. The colonel's younger daughter qualified in domestic science, married an architect and today lives in Lagos, Nigeria.

Meanwhile, back at Millom just after the war... "We had in the Centre a lot of men with high skills in a variety of technical fields," Col. Benirski remembers. "But there

was trouble in getting trade union recognition for their abilities and skilled men were being required to work as labourers. So I decided that what we ought to do was to start our own business. I received a lot of encouragement from the Commandant of Western Command and, eventually, made contact with the Ministry of Supply in Manchester."

Through the agency of Mr. T. B. Hustler, the managing director of a local timber company, the Poles were offered the use of premises he owned at Halton: a riverside building that once had been a linoleum mill, more recently an army camp. For a nominal sum, they rented half of the first floor. The workforce numbered only a score, every one of Polish origin, and they included bricklayers, turners, electricians, millers and mechanics. The Company was registered exactly thirty years ago this month.

"We had a name but, at first, we had no idea at all of what we were going to produce or manufacture! We started with any odd jobs we could get, even sharpening garden shears for a shilling, repairing doors and re-spraying cars. We had bought some of the equipment at Millom but in the early days often I was in desperation for work. Like everyone else, I was a shareholder in the Company but I had to be head cook and bottle-washer as well. As sub-contractors, we got the job of making the chassis for cars that were going to Australia. Then, those people went out of business, we didn't get our money and we were near disaster. It was a Lancaster businessman who rescued us, lent us some money and helped us to turn the corner."

One of Luneside's first major contracts was to erect military barracks for an engineering bridging camp and it was through the Ministry of Supply that they secured a contract from De Havilland to make aircraft components. Today, components are still what they make... for military aircraft, for Rolls-Royce at Barnoldswick, for the Atomic Energy Authority, even for Concorde and for the submarines built by Vickers. "We just work to drawings, we don't know where the components are to be fitted or what part they play," says the Chairman and Managing Director (and majority shareholder), Teodor Benirski, now one of only half-a-dozen Poles in a firm that employs more than 100 people in its factory-in-a-garden-setting.

No colonel in history could have been less deserving of the adjective peppery than he: he is courtesy personified, hospitable, thoroughly paternalistic and of the three cats that perpetually occupy his office two are forever slumbering on his desk (both, characteristically, were rescued as strays). At the age of seventy-eight he works twelve hours every day of the year, except Good Friday and Christmas Day, and says that his greatest pleasure is that "every one here



Above: The late Colonel, outside his 'factory-in-a-garden.' Last March, the Mayor and Mayoress of Lancaster called, to say 'thank you' on behalf of the city for the showpiece into which the old premises and their surroundings had been transformed.

Far left: No compulsory retirement at sixty-five for Luneside Engineering! A tool-maker, Mr. J. H. Ardron - seen here with the Colonel - retired in 1973, at the age of eighty-nine.

Left: Colonel Benirski (seated), with Mrs. Halina Makowiecka, a shareholder and member of the clerical staff; Mr. William Hughes, also a member of the staff; and Mr. Ernest Bradley (left), the Company Secretary.



seems to me like a member of a family."

He confesses that, originally, he intended to stay at Halton for only a couple of years before going home to "a free Poland. But my birthplace in Eastern Poland is now part of the Soviet Union, part of the Ukraine. It will always be in my heart but I can never go back there. I have never been back to Poland since I left it, forty years ago."

Teodor Benirski loves his closed, contented world in deepest Lancashire but occasionally he looks out from it - through a periscope that once was fitted to the submarine *Excalibur* and which he bought, for a few hundred pounds, for "the pleasure and amusement of my friends." Which is why it is located in the works canteen of Luneside Engineering Co. (Halton) Ltd.

MICHAEL HARDCASTLE

